

Confucian values in China's minority discourse and their possible importance for the situation of minority groups

Abstract

The paper utilizes Stevan Harrell's concept of civilization projects, especially two of them: Confucian and Communist ones, which both rank various ethnic groups of people according to different scales but with similar outcome, i.e. placing the Han majority at the top of the scale. They also appoint the ruling elites and entrust them the control of both the society and the important political discourse. Analysis of the minority-majority discourse, shows that the minorities are still treated as peripheral and exotic people, undeveloped and in the need of being taken care for. The possible change of the discourse from Marxist to more Confucian terms, following a general "re-Confucianization of China" is unlikely to bring many changes to the situation of the minorities, because they will be still refused the right to openly shape the course of such discourse. Hence their political options will remain also limited to the confines decreed by the Han-dominated state.

1. Civilization projects

What is the essence of the "civilization project?" Harrell (1995) uses the term to describe a specific relation between two (or more) groups of people, in which one has both the ability and the (perceived) right to dominate and transform the other one(s). Basically it is the relation between a cultural/civilization centre or core and its peripheries. The core is ranked higher, in terms of civilizational advancement, which usually encompasses both the material and the intellectual or spiritual level. Scaling is essential to the civilization project. Peripheries are only "peripheral" in relation to the centre. They do not have to regard themselves as "peripheral" and do not have to be – in absolute terms¹ – less developed than the core. For 17th century Jesuit missionaries, carrying on a Christian civilizational project, the Chinese were "peripheral" and in need of enlightenment. However, the Chinese perceived themselves not only as highly civilized, but in fact as central to the entire world and had certainly good reasons to do

¹ Or rather: as seen by an external observer or a third, uninvolved party.

so. Definition of the “peripheries” and the “core” is the basis of any such project and often a source of many conflicts between the groups involved.

The core exercises influence upon its peripheries and perceives it has a right to do it. The “right” does not mean only the ability to do so, for example by using force, although such ability is of course necessary for a successful civilization project to exist. The most important fact is that this influence is seen as beneficial for both of the parties involved, but especially to the peripheries. The people of the centre believe their actions are “for the best of all,” and not only for themselves. They believe they know best, what is good for the peripheral people (often perceived as childlike and incapable of proper reasoning) and act in their best interest, often at considerable expense on its own side.

Members of the peripheral groups do not necessarily share this views and often engage in various forms of opposition, from armed combat to different forms of passive resistance. However, within the most successful civilizational projects, they are usually persuaded to adopt the views of the centre and start to perceive themselves as backward, unenlightened and uncivilized, which of course facilitates their acculturation to the core civilization. Such a radical change of perception on the part of peripheries is not an easy goal for the centre to attain. The simple subjugation by the force of arms usually will not lead to such change: the conquered people may remain a rebellious minority, attached to their beliefs and ways of life. The direct confrontation often leads to solidification of identities, instead of acculturation and assimilation.

Therefore the civilizational project encompasses a wide range of actions of persuasive character, of which education is probably the most important. Christian missions offer a classical example: the founding of a school providing both religious and non-religious education was usually the second most important part of the mission, after the founding of a church, and more often than not, smaller missions combined the prayer hall and the classroom under the same roof. The missions also show that a civilizational project can be implemented on the territory not directly controlled by the core group. They often operated in far-away² places, among the people who barely tolerated them, at high personal risk.

To better understand this concept, let us examine two civilization projects, which were carried on in China: the Confucian one and the Communist one. The first one was worked as the basis base of the Chinese empire from the Han dynasty until 1911. The other was put into practice after the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949 and continues until today.

1.1 The Confucian civilizational project

For the Confucianists, the Confucian Culture was The Culture by a capital “c.” The ideal was a gentleman well versed in Confucian classics, taught in private and public schools of various levels, who, after passing a series of state-organized exams occupied various public posts. The scholars-officials were the elite of the Chinese society and were supposed to govern and give a good example of proper and moral conduct. The

² Again “for them” and “from the centre” – the natives believed they are “close” and “at home.”

system was *ex definitione* elitist and hierarchical, with the ruler at the top of the social pyramid, and unenlightened masses of *xiaoren* (small people), at the bottom.

One of the most important features of the Confucian ethics was the fact that the learning enabled man to progress and become more virtuous (the people had inborn possibilities, but in order to truly develop their humanity, they needed a proper – i.e. read “Confucian” – education; hence the developed school system). The idea was mirrored in the political organization of the state, which placed the best scholars at the top (and in the political centre). Less educated people were placed below; even lower were the masses of Chinese people, who, although not educated in the Classics and not schooled in rites and etiquette, generally followed the way of living of the elites (as far as they were able to). They were settled agriculturalists, who prayed to the same gods and conducted the same burial rites. At the extreme end were the barbarians, who even if they lived within the borders of the empire, led completely different lives. The most typical example of barbarians, at least in the Chinese eyes, were the nomads of the northeastern steppe, with their loose social organization and pastoral economy. They were considered not only alien, but also ungovernable, since they knew nothing about the proper duties of a man within a society. According to the Confucianists, they could be only be ruled by force, which was antithetical to the proper way of governance: the ruler should be “someone not fond of killing people” (Mencius in Ebrey, 1993, p. 22).

Such a world-view placed the Han people³ in the social and political centre of the empire and various other ethnic groups at the peripheries. They were classified as *shengfan* or *shufan* (raw or cooked barbarians), according to the degree of their acculturation to Chinese/Confucian ways (Harrison, 2001; Shepherd, 1993 both describe well the ethnic situation of 18th and 19th century Taiwan, one of the most troublesome borders of the empire). Multiculturalism and the idea of equality of cultures was alien to this type of thinking.

One may question such strong identification of “the Chinese” and “the Confucian,” since there were non-Chinese Confucian states and China itself was for long periods governed by the ethnically different dynasties, like Mongolian or Manchurian. Many of the noted Confucianists came from the borderlands of the empire, because once somebody passed the necessary exams and proved himself worthy, his ethnic background was no longer important.

The non-Chinese origin of many rulers does not change the fact that due to their speedy acculturation, their way of ruling adopted the ideas from Confucian classics – and most of the Confucian books were written in various forms of Chinese languages and described the ways of life of Sinitic people; that the predominant majority of Confucianists were from the central, not border territories of the empire; and that although the Confucian system did not block other people from joining the society it shaped, but it demanded at least partial sinification. The founding of schools to teach

³ The wider use of the term “*Hanzu*” (“Han nation”) is quite recent and connected to modern Chinese nationalism (often anti-Confucian in its origins). However, in the form of *Han ren* – Han people – it existed for many centuries (Gladney, 1998). We can use “Han” to describe the people who built the Middle Kingdom, if not for other reasons, then for the lack of a better term. They might not have thought of themselves as Han, but then, they did not call themselves using the English word “Chinese,” either.

the barbarians “proper ways” was seen as a very important part of stabilizing the territory and consolidating the government (Shepherd, 1993).

1.2 *The Communist project*

The Communists, who have ruled mainland China since 1949, introduced their own political vision and their own social stratification (which existed even in the periods of the strongest “equalization”). For all their egalitarianism, the Chinese Communists had similar view of the leading elites as the Confucianists did, only the elites were to be Marxist- not Confucian-educated. Communist Party and state cadres were supposed to care for the people, to enlighten them and serve as model workers and leaders.

The Communist inherited the vast empire, inhabited by many groups of people, whose cultures and ways of living varied enormously. The new rulers adhered to the idea of equality of all nationalities (which was a part of their anti-imperialist stance). To govern properly, they needed to know who are the people they were to govern, therefore in the 1950s they carried an extensive program of ethnic identification (*minzu shibie*),⁴ to identify all the groups, which split into a Han majority and 54 (later 55) national minorities (*shaoshu minzu*).

Next, the groups were ranked according to five point scale of economic development, corresponding to the five stages of history of classical Engels’ theory of the social progress, based in turn on the evolutionary paradigm of Lewis Henry Morgan (Harrell, 2001). Marxism is first of all an economical theory, so new hierarchization was based on economical standards (believed to be universal). The minorities were ranked as being at the slave, feudal or capitalist stage of development, and appropriate policies were worked out for them, to raise them to standards of socialist economy and society (in the period of the political turmoil of the 1950’ and 1960’ these separate policies were discarded and a general policy of forceful sinization was implemented, which treated all local cultures as “backward,” without taking into account their huge variety).

Although the base for scaling was different, the effect remained the same: the Hans were at the top, this time not as the most culturally advanced (as it was under Confucian empire), but as the most economically developed. Only one minority, the Koreans, was ranked equally high. The remaining groups were ranked lower, some as low as the “primitive” or “slave” stage. Basically, who once was barbarian, was likely to still be a barbarian, only the name and rhetoric used to refer to the respective group was somewhat different. Such world-view did not help the Hans to overcome their deeply rooted prejudices, nor did it make them more willing to listen to the minorities’ opinions (Harrell, 1995). Most of the policies developed on the basis of this project are essentially assimilationist, even if this is not their stated purpose (Heberer, 1989).

⁴ For some details of the process see, for example, Fei, 1990.

2. The minority/ethnic discourse

The public and especially the political discourse is an important feature of political life, revealing the state of the relationships between different social groups, political parties and other bodies or between the government and the people. Critical discourse analysts point out that the discourse is usually shaped by those who are in power: the state, the wealthy, the strong religious or other organizations (Dijk, 1997). The media discourse in China is especially interesting, because – thanks to the modern technology – it is possible to observe it from outside of the country, which gives its researchers the unique possibility of continuous study. Also, because the electronic media are now multilingual, we can follow two versions of it: the one for internal consumption (in Chinese) and the one presented to the world (translated into English), and observe possible discrepancies.

The regulation of public discourse in China was always seen as state prerequisite. The Confucianists spoke about rectification of names (*zhengming*), through which the ruler decided on the proper usage of the words and actions connected to them. Such regulation also encompassed the official interpretations of the Classics – this task was delegated to the scholars of the Imperial Academy. The modern version of the state control over public discourse has form of the widespread censorship, which the PRC imposes on its media. The electronic media are especially well controlled, therefore what we can read bears an official “stamp of approval.”

The response of the minority groups to the state policies, if it is not to be promptly silenced or simply not voiced at all (because of the media auto-censorship), must be kept well within the discursive frames approved by the state. Any attempts to redefine the terms of description have to be made slowly and cautiously. It should be pointed out that voices of dissatisfaction or dissent are sometimes heard and there is a degree of tolerance to them. However, the borders of such tolerance are not well defined and not secured – for example by the enforced laws warranting freedom of speech.

The state – defined minority discourse in China has been described as “orientalistic,” because it follows the pattern well described in the famous book “Orientalism” (Said, 1979), which showed how – especially in the 19th century – European authors and scientists described the Eastern people as exotic “Others:” mysterious, hard to understand, but at the same time attractive and fascinating and, repulsive and unpredictable. Dru Gladney identified the same features in Chinese descriptions of the minority people, including the not-described benchmark of “normality” (from which “the Others” differ). In European Orientalistic discourse it was the Europeans, who functioned as such benchmark. In the modern Chinese discourse, the Chinese majority serve in this role (Gladney, 1994).

A brief look at some of the recent Chinese publications confirms Gladney’s observations. The descriptions concentrate on peculiarities, which differentiate the minorities from the Han majority. Sometimes these descriptions reveal more about their author than the people described, just like the careful reading of Orientalists depictions of the East tells more about them, than about the Easterners. The passage below is a good example:

The Russian nationality is very particular about etiquette. [...] If you are to be the guest of a Russian family, the first thing to remember is that you must knock on the door and before you enter you must wipe your feet, sit where the host asks you to and never just come in and sit on the bed. You must ask permission before smoking and be careful to put the ashes in the ash tray. If you smoke a cigarette, you should be prepared to offer the whole pack to the host and his family (Zhang and Zeng, 1993, p. 199).

Looking through the illustrations of such books (e.g. Xing, 2005), it is also easy to notice how “exotic” and “feminine” the minorities are (treating peripheral people as women is a part of a “sexual metaphor,” inherent to civilisation projects (Harrell, 1995). Photographs usually show young women, clad in colourful, if not gaudy, costumes. Very often they engage in “traditional occupations” like weaving or sewing. The men, whose dress is usually not so pretty, are less interesting, and besides, they tend to discard traditional costumes much sooner than women. Presumably the readers are not interested in seeing the people clothed the same way they do, so the authors avoid taking such shots.

Among the most-depicted activities most frequently depicted are various forms of merry-making:⁵ dancing, playing traditional instruments, singing (with special forms like rhyming duets duly noted); great attention is paid to festivals. Religious beliefs, especially those not shared by the Han majority (i.e. other than not Mahayana Buddhism or taoism) are mentioned relatively often, which can be seen as another mark of “otherness.” A characteristic feature of many Chinese scientific publications about minorities cultures is the absence of the word “culture” itself. Instead of “culture” (*wenhua*, which has strong, Confucian and Han Chinese overtones and is associated with written culture), words like “*fengsu xiguan*” (folk customs) are used even in monographic descriptions of the entire group cultures like in *Yizu fengsu zhi* (*The customs of the Yi*) (Bamo, 1992). When written (*wen*) sources are analysed, *wenhua* is used more often e.g. in *Bimo Wenhua Lun* (Zuo and Tao, 1993).

3. Confucianization of discourse

The weakening of the official Marxist ideology has created an ideological void in China, which may become dangerous. Two possible ideologies are most likely to take over this empty space: nationalism (especially in its state-promoted form) and some form of reformulated Confucianism. The emergence of active (one may even say “aggressive”) nationalism during their last decades is obvious in China. Such nationalism may appear dangerous, especially if the identity questions are not well solved as is the case of nowadays’s China: the ethnic Han nationalism can dominate the civic Chinese (encompassing also non-Han citizens of China) one. The possible “clash of civilizations” in some minority regions, especially in Xinjiang, would be possible outcome of such situation.

⁵ As we all know, it is the children who spend most of their time playing; and treating the peripheral people as “childlike” is also typical for the civilization project.

The Confucianism appears to be a safer option: in the case of international relations it provides a link with important China's neighbours; in the case of internal policy, being essentially a non-ethnic ideology,⁶ may bring about lessening of the ethnic problems. Since it is, first of all, a political ideology, Confucianism is a useful tool for the state, especially because it puts the state above the individual. At the same time it has a softer side, which may help to overcome the acute crises of present day China, like widening the income gap, social inequalities and lack of protection of the people by the state.

Confucian doctrine emphasizes care for well-being of the people (which is why it may be so useful now); reviving the doctrine of filial piety, never truly lost in China, may help to solve the problem of caring for the elderly. At the same time it will strengthen, not weaken, the position of the state and the role of the (ruling) elites. Stressing (Confucian) harmony over (Marxist) class conflict now plays a similar role; the latter, so important in Mao's times, is certainly de-emphasized now.

With regard to the ethno-political problems, several others Confucian ideas should be noted: the notion of Great Unity, useful in opposing the separatist (called "splittist" in China) tendencies, especially on the part of Tibetans and Uighurs (or, even more, Taiwanese, although they are not a national minority); loyalty to the ruler and love of country; or even the filial piety, which on the surface is only a family value, but has in fact always served as the model for the obedience and loyalty to the ruler, mentioned above (Guo, 2003).

It is rather unlikely that the hierarchisation of groups based on the adherence to Confucian values will be introduced again – the Confucianism is certainly not likely to receive such strong official sanction. The "equality of nations," so often stressed by the PRC on the international forum, would be at odds with the "inequality of nationalities," if the latter was declared an official policy back home. The "Confucianisation" of the minority discourse takes an ostensibly harmless form of describing the "unified nation of fifty six nationalities" as the PRC is invariably called in any Chinese publication dealing with the minority question, as the "family of nationalities."

If in its original, 19th century European usage the expression "family of nations" had a rather egalitarian meaning,⁷ the family concepts, so central to Confucian ideology, are all hierarchical. Out of five main human relations, the three kinship relations all presuppose subordination of one party to another: son is obedient to father, wife to husband and younger brother to the elder one. It is unthinkable that the Han Chinese would position themselves in the "younger brother" place, when they always underline their higher level of development, which should grant them the dominating position. It is rather the "feminine" minorities, who would play the part of the humble wife. The term *xiongdì minzu*, "elder/younger brother nationalities" is used both in Chinese press and Chinese scientific writing (e.g. in the Chinese title of the article by (Zhou, 2004)). Such "Confucian" descriptions are in fact made to fit the nationalistic discourse, strengthening the notion of China's unity:

⁶ It was Han-created and Han-dominated, but, as noted previously, it remained open for other people.

⁷ It is worth noting, however, that these modern nations constituting the "family" considered themselves as a kind of world elite.

The official media used the same approach to present the ethnic minorities in China. They were identified as “brother ethnicities” (*xiongdì minzu*), also “descendants of the Yellow Emperor,” even though these ethnic minorities never regarded the Yellow Emperor as their ancestor (Pan et al., 2005).

It must be stressed that the dominating party is supposed to be benevolent and caring. But the extent of this benevolence, in both a qualitative and a quantitative sense, is fully decided by the donor, not by the recipient, who is rather supposed to show loyalty and filial piety than question the actions undertaken by the “father” or the “older brother.” To give a more practical example, the development of minority regions is indisputable if one considers on transportation and communication links, educational and health facilities (Mackerras, 2004). But what exactly is “development” means is fully decided solely by the political, and Han Chinese – dominated centre and is sometimes perceived as exploitation of already scarce local resources. Economic changes, although statistically beneficial, are not distributed equally: e.g. modern industry generates employment, but rather of skilled Hans. Liew (2004) notes that in Xinjiang the state-sponsored development failed to promote national unity.

The developing of the “socialist” economy is not longer part of the PRC agenda: “modern” and “advanced” one took its place. This change did not change the fact that the people of the areas being developed have little to say in the matter. Herzfeld (2001) described similar attitude of the international organizations, donors of economic help, but also noted that questioning the simplistic and one-sided approach to the “development” became now an important feature of relations the donors and the recipients such help. In China such dialogue has not yet appeared: re-defining the development means questioning the official state policy, and the state is inclined to view it as potentially subversive activity.

On the positive side, the benevolence and humanity of the dominating party, if implemented, certainly benefits the minorities. Although the PRC is often accused of persecuting the religion practitioners, in case of minorities more lenient treatment and even actions of the state against the publications found offensive, e.g. those of Chinese Muslims found offensive, was noted. On the negative side, full control of the policy and of the discourse is in the hands of the majority, which decides whom, and to what extent, it will help, and whom and to what extent, it will punish (Gladney, 1999). The line between “religious” and “political” activity is sometimes very thin. For an interesting analysis of, how the state controls the discourse through the term usage, see Dwyer (2005).

The main problem is that the ultimate control lies with the Party, which – unlike the Chinese state – does not have pro-minority policies for itself. Minority members can advance socially despite being non-Hans, and sometimes thanks to it, due to e.g. special universities created for them. But they receive no such help, when they try to advance within the Party structures: here the education and training is strongly unified.

Conclusions

Despite positive values of “care” and “benevolence,” introducing (or re-introducing) some form of Confucianism into of minority discourse is not likely to bring important changes to the minority people, as long as the state, and more importantly – the Party – exercises full control over such discourse. With the strong hierarchy and ranking of the groups of people still in place, all the changes must be “top-down.” The “top” is occupied by the Hans, who, however sympathetic they might be to the minority cause, usually lack the hands-on experience with minority work and always – the experience of *being* a minority. Political elites fear the internal disorder and disunity, including possible (although not very probable) separationism of Tibetans, and Xinjiang's Uighurs. Such fears are not likely to make them willing listeners to the (“uneducated, backward, and underdeveloped”) minorities.

Without granting the minorities an “equal voice,” including the rights to redefine the terms of the discourse, the real autonomy for the minorities is hardly possible (of course many other changes would also be necessary, most importantly the promulgation and *execution* of appropriate laws). Such autonomy could in turn prove to be the way to solve to China's problem with minorities' dissent. The already very strong economic ties with the minority regions and general, external control of the territories (usually located in volatile border regions) would remain in place, but the the minorities will of self-government and protection of their own cultures could also be satisfied.

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